

# The Internet and China's Foreign Policy Decision-making

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Received: 27 November 2015 / Accepted: 13 March 2016 / Published online: 4 April 2016  
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**Abstract** As a milestone of media convergence, the Internet is altering every aspect of politics, economy, society, and interaction among human beings. Moreover, foreign policy decision-making (FPDM), a traditional arena of elite politics in China, is also slowly becoming more and more influenced by the Internet in a networked world. The increased diversity, velocity and free flow of foreign policy information, has raised public attention to foreign policy issues. This, combined with the widespread public discussion facilitated by the Internet, changes the context of, and exerts pressure on, the process of Chinese FPDM. The aim of researching this new phenomenon is to figure out the relationship between the Internet and Chinese FPDM in theory, and to enlighten the role of the Internet in Chinese politics.

**Keywords** The Internet · Internet communication · Foreign policy decision-making · China

## 1 Introduction

The dynamic process and outcomes of foreign policy depend on the interplay of various factors. Putnam believes that foreign policy decision-making (FPDM) is influenced by a two-level game between diplomacy and domestic policy (Putnam 1988, 459), while Mintz and Derouen Jr. (2012, 4) add the ‘decision environment’ and ‘psychological factors’ as additional determinants of FPDM, which further illustrates its complexity. Considering the different structural systems of FPDM

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from one country to another, the context and process of foreign policy have become even more critical due to the advent of the Internet era.

From word of mouth communication, the ‘paper-and-pen’ era to electronic media, the amount and velocity of information circulation has greatly increased. In ‘*Understanding Media: The Extension of Man*’, Marshall McLuhan, a pioneer in media studies, argues that the media, rather than the content it carries, should be the focus of communication studies: the media machine alters our relationships to one another and to ourselves (McLuhan 1994, 7–8). His famous statement that ‘the medium is the message’, coined in 1964, received heavy criticism with experts arguing that attributing considerable social impacts to each and every technological innovation is a common mistake in communication studies (Yordanova 2012, 6). However, the prevalence of computer and computer-based communication has since led scholars to reconsider this (Rheingold 2000, 16). Nowadays, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), which already exceed computer-based communication technology, have not only increased the speed of information transmission, but also altered the methods of political participation and opinion expression in almost every country.

The Internet, which is logically linked together by a globally unique address space based on the Internet Protocol (IP) or its subsequent extensions/follow-ons, is capable of transmitting information in any format—text, audio, or video (Klotz 2004, 1). As an instrument of information transmission and milestone of media convergence, the Internet involves one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many, and many-to-one exchanges of local, national, and global information, and therefore, it accelerates the speed of information transmission and lowers barriers to entry (Chadwick 2006, 7). It has been argued that ‘the Internet is at once like no other communication device and like every other communication device’ (Klotz 2004, 1). More importantly, as a new and inexpensive way for information collection and publication, for communicating and coordinating actions on a global scale, and for reaching out to policymakers (Denning 2001, 287), the Internet has brought about the free flow of information, raised public awareness of current issues, offered a platform for public discussion, provided a means of political participation, and ultimately exerted an impact on domestic and foreign affairs.

It has been argued that the Internet has been the ‘prime mover’ in changes in diplomacy (Seo 2009, 3). Indeed, externally, governments now manage part of their relationships with other governments electronically (Grant 2005, 24) and engage foreign publics through the Internet to implement public diplomacy (Seo 2009, 3). Internally, the Internet offers an opportunity for public discussion and supervision on FPDM, which is especially apparent in authoritarian systems (Chadwick 2006, 7). In terms of FPDM, the Internet influences the decision-making context and dynamic processes by accelerating foreign policy information circulation and influencing the selection of decision problems and alternatives. Considering that China is now an emerging regional and even global power with a giant economic capacity and increasing international influence, studying the interaction between the Internet and Chinese FPDM will be beneficial for us to understand contemporary international relations and its role in world politics.

Specifically for China, the democratization of diplomacy brought by the Internet is a different story. The famous statement by Zhou Enlai, former Chinese Prime Minister, that ‘diplomacy is no small matter’ had already indicated that China’s unique political characteristics used to leave FPDM positioned far from the general public, yet nowadays changing governing principles and a worldwide democratization process have increased public participation in foreign policy. The Internet has accelerated this process: full control from the central government is increasingly a thing of the past. Even countries, such as China and Burma, which had successfully regulated and controlled Internet content, have been unable to fully implement state censorship (Solomon 2000, 42). Raised public awareness of foreign policy issues and increased levels of public discussion and supervision on FPDM as the result of the Internet deserve more analysis. Put differently, it is the interplay between the revolutionary development of communication technologies and the continuous adjustment of foreign policy process that gradually moulds Chinese foreign policy.

As an appealing phenomenon to scholars at home and overseas, ground-breaking research has been conducted on the Internet and its influence on foreign policy in general, and on Chinese foreign policy in particular. The Internet offers an inexpensive way to collect information and exchange ideas for individuals and small groups, which did not have enough resources in the pre-Internet era. This helps social activists evade government censors and monitors in politically repressive states, and transfer their messages to foreign policy decision-makers by collecting and publishing the information, coordinating actions, and lobbying decision-makers (Denning 2001, 239). In China, uncontrolled information about foreign affairs is heavily circulated on social media by passionate ‘netizens’ (Hong 2005; Jiang and Shen 2007; Wang 2009), in concert with the nationalism sensation in the virtual community (Shirk 2007; Zhao 2013), often exerting public pressure on relevant governmental organs to respond immediately (Jakobson and Knox 2010). Nevertheless, prior research mainly stresses the pressure on Chinese FPDM caused by the increased diversity of foreign policy information and online public discussion, without giving much attention to its impact on the process of Chinese FPDM. Jiang and Shen’s paper enlightens this research, but it largely focuses on the history and contemporary development of Chinese foreign affairs institutions and governmental utilization of mass media in influencing public opinion on foreign policy, rather than the role of public opinion in Chinese FPDM in a networked world (Jiang and Shen 2007, 43–46). In other words, the influence of the Internet on the *context* of FPDM has been widely discussed, yet its influence on the decision-making *process* has been rarely mentioned.

This study aims to address this gap and answer the question of how the Internet affects Chinese FPDM from two aspects: its context and process. Therefore, the remainder of this study consists of four sections. The first section provides a theoretical framework covering the characteristics of the Internet communication and influential factors in China’s foreign policy. The second moves to discuss the changed context of Chinese FPDM influenced by the diversity of foreign policy information and increased public awareness of foreign policy issues due to the prevalence of the Internet. The third section explores the interaction between the

Internet (Internet-based communication) and the process of Chinese FPDM, followed by a conclusion.

## 2 Internet Communication and China's Foreign Policy

Since officially joining the global Internet in 1994, its development in China has occurred at an impressive rate. Chinese leaders recognized the unprecedented opportunities provided by ICTs for China's economic development, and endeavored to follow the twin-track strategy of promoting informatization and industrialization to realize the process of 'leapfrogging'. In this sense, the government became a strong support mechanism behind the establishment of information infrastructures and the promotion of ICT applications through heavy investment (Dai 2003, 25).

Due to the prevalence of mobile communication devices that can be easily connected to the Internet, the Internet is no longer a strange word to the general public, but is rather a necessity for nearly half of the population. According to the latest research, China has 618 million 'netizens', including 500 million using mobile devices (China Internet Network Information Center 2014b), and 60 % of 'netizens' search for information about current affairs (China Internet Network Information Center 2014a). The Internet provides a platform for a huge number of Chinese people to collect information, exchange ideas, discuss domestic and foreign affairs, and express their own opinions, all of which is yielding more and more influence on their daily lives, as well as many other aspects of China's social structures and political system (Hong 2005, 93). Accordingly, the Internet and Internet communication also exert influence on Chinese FPDM.

As long as nation states remain the main players in world politics, a country's foreign policy behavior—based on its requirements of survival and security, combined with the policies it adopts in pursuit of its national interest—should be thought of as a bundle of foreign policies used to achieve what it wants under existing constraints (Palmer and Morgan 2006, 3). According to Mintz and DeRouen, FPDM refers to the choices, which individuals, groups, and coalitions that make affect nation's actions on the international stage (Mintz and Derouen Jr. 2012, 3), which can be grouped into four phases: identifying the decision problem, searching for alternatives, choosing an alternative, and executing the alternative (Robinson and Snyder 1965, 437).

The mechanism of Chinese FPDM has experienced substantial changes, since the People's Republic was founded in 1949. In the Mao era, Chinese FPDM was centralized under the watch of only a few high-level leaders and foreign policymakers, but pragmatism broke out under Deng Xiaoping. During the leadership of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, the democratization, institutionalization, and scientification of Chinese FPDM were gradually realized. Now, more government departments are involved in the process of Chinese FPDM, while a system of government–academia–civil society has also been established (Gong, et al. 2009, 53).

More specifically, the structural determinants of China's foreign policy consist of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the Central Military Commission and the

Station Council: incorporating the Central Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group—State Council Foreign Affairs Office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and other related ministries and departments (Paltiel 2010, 2–7). Nevertheless, China's foreign policy extends horizontally and vertically, as is reflected by the involvement of more actors in Chinese FPDM, and more issues requiring consideration. After Xi Jinping took office, a new institution named Chinese National Security Commission (CNSC) was officially established in February 2014, with its broad objectives, including policy coordination and political power consolidation (Lampton 2015, 759), and maintaining long lasting peace and stability of the nation becomes the key point of Chinese foreign policy (Zhao 2015). As a result, influential factors in China's foreign policy have increased beyond the traditional domain of foreign policy.

Nevertheless, the Internet does not affect the process of Chinese FPDM directly. Rather, the Internet exerts an impact on the context and process of Chinese FPDM by altering the process of, and adding new factors to, information dissemination. In short, international relations have always been profoundly affected by the development of technologies, which will complicate the process of international decision-making and reduce the exclusive control of states (Westcott 2008, 2; Su and Xu 2013, 139).

First, the Internet incorporates the elements of interpersonal communication and mass communication. Through the Internet, it is easy to make one-to-one communication via email, instant message applications, and private messaging. It also possesses the capability of conventional mass communication: the Internet and online news also delivers text, pictures, voices, and videos to a huge audience. Some scholars have argued that the failure of the U.S. in the Vietnam War was due to the uncontrolled media coverage of collateral damage, accompanied by strong, emotive pictures (Stafford 2013). The impact of the Internet is such that it makes it even more difficult for governments and key actors to control the flow of such information.

Second, the Internet also adds new features to the process of communication, defined by Janoschka as 'interactive mass communication' (Janoschka 2004, 191). The rise and utilization of the Internet not only simplify interaction between traditional 'senders' and 'receivers', but also change their role in the online communication process. As a result, the audience actively provides 'feedback' to editors rather than passively receiving the news. Not only does the Internet change the speed of foreign policy information transmission, but also vitiates the role of news journalists and editors as gatekeepers. This enables foreign policy information which might be false or contrary to the standpoints of the home government, to easily reach the online audience.

Third, the Internet greatly lowers barriers of entry and diminishes the cost of communication. This statement might be considered controversial: huge levels of investment in the Internet infrastructure have been shouldered by many governments, and according to an official report, China invested a total of 4.3 trillion Yuan (630 billion U.S. dollars) in the Internet infrastructure construction from 1997 to 2009 (China.com 2010), but the cost for individuals is minimal. Moreover, the Internet also empowered the general public to broadcast personal ideas through

virtual communities and networking websites with no extra cost, which explains why many-to-many communication represents a new phenomenon in the Internet communication era.

Finally, the Internet-enabled mobile devices further enhance the ability of individuals to obtain information and express themselves. Citizens also have more freedom to search for and read information at any time in any place. The general public is empowered by such technologies to discuss foreign policy and supervise the government's external activities, at least to a certain extent; meanwhile, the government also has to deal with a considerable amount of foreign policy information from diversified sources.

The influence of the Internet on the context and process of Chinese FPDM includes these general factors, as well as other features specific to China. As we have seen, the Internet increases the diversity and speed of foreign policy information (Grant 2005, 5), constituting part of the context of FPDM for each state in the world, and China is no exception. During the process of FPDM, heightened public awareness and public discussion about foreign affairs by a growing number of informed citizens (Baum 2003, 8) will affect the selection of decision problems, and support or limit official work in searching for alternatives to these problems. All the factors described above should be considered during an analysis on the process of Chinese FPDM.

### **3 The Internet and the Context of China's Foreign Policy Decision-making**

It is suggested that different contextual features have distinctive implications for decision-making (Farnham 2004, 443), because the way of thinking about decision problems and procedures for dealing with them will be decided by different features of the context within which the decisions will be made (Tetlock 1985, 306). The Internet, with the increased diversity of foreign policy information sources, accelerated the speed of information dissemination and raised public attention to foreign policy issues, has altered the context of Chinese FPDM.

#### **3.1 Increased Diversity and Speed of Foreign Policy Information on the Internet**

Before the advent of the Internet, foreign policy information was controlled by official diplomatic approaches and state-owned news agencies, meaning that, as the sole resource of foreign policy information, the government could largely decide what the public can see and watch. Reports from foreign media were transmitted to the public mainly through interpersonal communication or radio, which limited its impact. However, the Internet has greatly changed things, lessened government control of information flow, and promoted the marketization of the Chinese media. Suddenly, the government is merely one of many sources of foreign policy information in the country.

The dominant status of overseas missions, diplomats, and other professionals in information collection and management is thus being lost. As official representatives of the country, diplomatic missions in foreign countries remain a vital component of government policy, but their functions in researching host countries and collecting information about unexpected incidents are also disappearing. Leading mass media companies, including Associated Press (AP), Reuters, L'Agence France-Presse (AFP), and other transnational corporations, broadcast the latest events at lightning speed; indeed, even China's Xinhua News Agency has branches around the world, which also possess the capacity to report real-time international events.

This combination of transnational media companies and the Internet increases the speed of information transmission and broadens the range of information recipients, leaving the government not needing to rely solely on original information from formal intelligent reports, diplomatic cables or in-house experts (Bollier 2003, 8). In China, such has been the market-oriented reform of mass media that real-time information has become the key point of competition: thus, local media compete in broadcasting the latest news by becoming subscribers to Xinhua, or translating international news from foreign agencies. Netizens are also able to access the websites of transnational news or local media agencies. According to this point of view, the governmental organs related to foreign affairs have lost control of information transmission and information management.

In addition, the development of ICTs—including the Internet, digital cameras contained in portable devices, and mobile phones with easy access to the Internet—appears to have resulted in at least a degree of transparency. Professional journalists and editors have been freed from heavy dependence on official information sources (Robinson 2013). These innovations bring more information about real-time international events to both policymakers and citizens, but, more negatively, have also diminished the quality and content of news reporting. The public now receives much more information, but a great deal of it is duplicated, repetitive, and flawed (Anderson 2009, 418).

Although today's policymakers are not compelled to react precipitously, they face pressure to take decisions quickly because of the high pace set by ICTs in delivering information (Seib 2012, 86). Moreover, the competition and pressure provided by this were critical for the government to maintain and enhance its credibility as a reliable foreign policy information resource and to secure positive first impressions in public opinion.

However, as Grant laments, '[The Internet] brings the outline of an immediate event, but it cannot bring instant comprehension' (Grant 2005, 5). Thus, there is a greater 'tension between velocity and judgement' than ever (Bollier 2003, 5). Political scientist Eytan Gilboa further explains the dilemma, which the government faces in the Internet communication era: foreign policy experts, intelligence officers, counselors, and diplomats may make wrong decisions if their rapid analyses are based on incomplete information, yet their work may become useless if they take necessary steps to verify information and make foreign policy suggestions based on having done so, because they will then lose out to the media and global competitors. Much the same scenario applies to Chinese FPDM (Gilboa 2002, 92–3).



Thus, the Internet offers the potential to revolutionize the dissemination of foreign policy information and expression of public opinion, but still faces considerable problems precisely because of the free flow of information. Citizens are now able to access information, which has not been distorted by the authorities, and mobilize public discussion on relevant foreign policy issues accordingly; however, unrestricted flow of information without necessary filtering could be harmful, because public opinion might end up being based on misinformation (Savigny 2002, 5–6).

For the government, increased velocity of information and public opinion circulation requires efficient decision-making. Therefore, the government, mass media, and the general public need to be cautious about such misinformation while utilizing ICTs; and above all, the government, the only reliable source for foreign policy information in the past, should learn to take advantage of ICTs to enhance its credibility within the competitive media environment.

### 3.2 Raised Public Attention to Foreign Policy Issues by the Internet

Along with the accelerating pace and increasing amount of information transmitted on the Internet, more approaches are available now for the Chinese public to access information related to foreign policy issues. However, the Internet brings an explosion of information, which makes the attention (instead of the information itself) that becomes the scarce resource in this Internet-led communication era (Falkinger 2008, 1616). Now, news outlets compete for audience's attention rather than exclusive story (information). In addition, it also causes a paradox, whereby individuals claim that their interest in foreign affairs declines on the one hand, while on the other hand, their response to foreign affairs increases. This may be explained by Baum's model of the link between entertainment soft news seeking and the rise of foreign affairs consciousness, namely, the by-product model of information consumption (Baum 2003, 269).

Before moving to talk about the soft news brought by the Internet and its influence on the public's attention to foreign policy issues, it is worth noting that the competition between the traditional media and the Internet as an instrument of information transmission, and commercialization of mass media, coerced both the traditional media and the Internet media to attract more eyes with soft news (Stockmann 2011, 269). Generally speaking, the important news topics usually, including public policies, government, and foreign affairs, are regarded as hard news, while soft news refers to the rest. However, Tewksbury and Rittenberg prefer to define soft news as a news format that—regardless of topics—tells stories with an emphasis on human interest and sensationalism over national interests or information quality (Tewksbury and Rittenberg 2012, 77). Since the 1980s, the way that mass media covers major political issues, including foreign policy crises, has been changing from hard news to soft news (Tewksbury and Rittenberg 2012, 115).

As it indicated above, the increasing speed and amount of information on the Internet makes that the attention of the recipients become the scarce resource, and the Internet has clearly contributed to the proliferation of soft news (Baum 2003,



271). As a result, the different choices between soft news and hard news are made by the traditional mass media as a response to the challenge from the Internet, because the news outlets aim to attract audiences and increase profits in market competition. News outlets based on the Internet and traditional mass media both have to make their news reports more appealing to maintain their audience (Harris 2014, 2).

During this process, the consumption of foreign affairs themed soft news raises public attention to foreign policy information. As a matter of fact, news outlets can reframe information about foreign policy issues into entertainment-oriented informational programming and the customers of soft news get basic information about foreign issues as an unintentional by-product of seeking entertainment (Baum 2002, 105). This may arouse the recipients' interest in seeking more information about the foreign issues, which can be easily realized by clicking the links about relevant reports on the same webpage.

The Internet promotes the proliferation and transmission of foreign policy information covered by soft news, which happens in both the West and China. Taking a close look at news production in China, the coverage of foreign policy issues by soft news on the Internet as well as on the traditional media is not a new phenomenon with the utilization of the Internet and marketization of mass media (Stockmann 2013, 32). Scholarly surveys suggest there is a high demand in China for negative stories about the US and Japan, and news outlets take the customers' preference into consideration in selecting news reports (Lee et al. 2015, 15).

It seems that the government has lost control of information about foreign policy issues, because the audience can easily turn to the Internet and search for alternative sources of information. However, the Internet provides the Chinese public with the ability to access foreign policy issues through more approaches, making the formation of public opinion possible.

Therefore, all these new factors, including the increasing diversity and velocity of foreign policy information, raising public attention to foreign policy issues, and the shaping of public opinion toward Chinese FPDM, have added new complexities to the context of Chinese FPDM. With regard to public opinion, online public opinion cannot be simply equated with public opinion in general, because online public opinion is expressed by netizens—a special group of citizens—and public opinion is an expression of the overall population. However, as the Internet and Internet-based social media plays a critical role in social mobilization in China (Silberman 2012), taking online public opinion into consideration during Chinese FPDM aims to prevent potential offline mass protests evolving from online sentiments (Hu 2012). Since this study focuses on the political influence of the Internet, public opinion in this work means online public opinion, and the two terms will be used interchangeably. In the following section, the interplay between these new factors brought by the Internet and the process of Chinese FPDM will be further explored.

## 4 The Internet and the Process of China's Foreign Policy Decision-making

Apart from the changed context of Chinese FPDM with the utilization of the Internet, online public discussion and public opinion on foreign policy issues also affect its process. As aforementioned, FPDM includes four phases: identifying the decision problem, searching for alternatives, choosing an alternative, and executing the alternative (Robinson and Snyder 1965, 437). The Internet influences the process of Chinese FPDM by forming online public opinions and exerting pressure on the governmental organs closely related to FPDM, which will be manifested on the selection of decision problems and alternatives dealing with these problems.

### 4.1 Identifying the Decision Problems in the Internet Era

Given that the amount and velocity of information about international events has increased because of to the Internet, public opinion has become an increasingly influential determinant of FPDM—a clear change in countries, such as China. Not so long ago, the state-owned official mass media provided the only information on foreign policy. But with the diversification of news media in China and rapidly increasing the Internet use, its citizens now have more ways to get closer to foreign policy information and discourse (Lanteigne 2013, 28). Online news organizations, blogs and micro-blogs (Weibo/Chinese Twitter), have proliferated: some social media websites, such as QQ-Zone, WeChat, or Sina Weibo, have tens of millions of subscribers.

Therefore, social media—networking websites and virtual communities for public discussion, created by new communication technologies—have equipped ordinary people with the operational tools with which to create and broadcast their own cultural products. Thus, they are now writers, publishers, editors, and artists rather than merely customers, readers, or an audience. Instead of just listening to and digesting the knowledge produced by others, they have become information producers themselves (Yang 2009, 216). The lowering of barriers empowers the Internet users to create and broadcast information and opinion. Meanwhile, ICTs, including the Internet, turn the world into a ‘global village’, in that information now arrives on our desktops from halfway around the globe through no more than the click of a button (Logan 2010, 358).

Accordingly, high-speed information circulation and public discussion on foreign affairs starts having an influence on official decisions in identifying the problems that need to be addressed in two ways. First, the information related to Chinese citizens traveling abroad may need an immediate governmental response. Second, ICTs make the world a ‘global village’, calling for official speeches on international events.

For the governmental organs related to FPDM in China, real-time information about foreign policy issues that may affect China's external relations with other international players and the outside world often requires an immediate response, because it not only affects China's international status on the world stage but also

influences internal perception of the Chinese government about whether it has the capacity to protect national interests, and this ultimately has an impact on China's internal stability (Wang 2005, 674).

Besides, with globalization combining with the continuous process of China's reform and opening-up, more and more Chinese people are now working or studying overseas. Real-time information about international events transmitted by the Internet may raise concerns about overseas Chinese protection. In 2013, over 98 million residents from mainland China travelled abroad, a figure which has increased by 10 million for 4 consecutive years, while more than 20,000 overseas branches of Chinese enterprises were distributed in about 200 countries and areas (China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014). The growing number of Chinese residents traveling, working, or studying abroad also increases the chances of some of them becoming caught up in local incidents. In this sense, international reports and news may also require an immediate reaction from overseas Chinese missions or relevant departments in China's MFA, as it may relate to the health and safety of Chinese citizens.

More importantly, the 'people-oriented' diplomatic idea, which provides the rule for consular assistance and protection, also requires an immediate response from the Chinese government. This was coined in October 2003 by Hu Jintao, and viewed as a key guideline for internal development before being extended to the foreign policy realm (Jin and Liu 2009, 30). Yang Jiechi, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of China, explains this in two aspects: first, that China's foreign policy serves the basic interests of Chinese people and the country's economic progress; second, that Chinese people represent the base and support for the country's foreign policy (Xinhuanet.com 2007).

In practice, a typical case was that 13 Chinese crew members were killed on the Mekong River on October 5, 2011. This news first appeared on Forum Tianya, a famous Chinese virtual community, on the following day with a blogpost by a witness, and online discussion about investigating the truth and punishing the murderers had already filled the virtual community (France 24 2011). As a matter of fact, the government did not release this news to the public immediately, leading to rumors and criticism of the government for failing to protect overseas Chinese. The online discussion questioned the slow official response, low governmental capacity for dealing with the transnational legal issues, and the lack of media coverage, which reached its climax on October 9 (He 2011). Thus, on the same day, to address the increasing public mood of discontent, the Spokesman of China's MFA officially released the news regarding the massacre on the Mekong River, and explained that the delay in releasing the news was because of the difficulty of verifying online information and the geopolitical complexity of this issue, which helped to stop rumors in the virtual community (Liu and Zhou 2012).

Since then, official new reports continuously covered the progress of governmental actions in dealing with this issue: officials meeting with diplomats from Thailand, Laos, and Burma; a working group from Yunnan province was sent to investigate the case; two joint working groups from China's MFA, Ministry of Public Security, Ministry of Transport were sent to Yunnan province and Thailand to investigate the crime scene. (Xinhuanet.com 2012). This satisfied the public's

desire for information transparency and increased public confidence in the government. Eventually, international shipping on the Mekong River was restarted, and the murderers were executed, while China has also begun joint patrols with Burma and Laos to protect shipping on the Mekong River (BBC.co.uk 2011). The Internet accelerates the reaction process of consular assistance and protection, and the Chinese government was able to keep its vow to protect Chinese citizens abroad despite enormous time-related pressures.

Besides foreign policy information related to Chinese citizens abroad, a prompt response to international events and provision of necessary international assistance, particularly to incidents which may involve foreign citizens, also requires real-time diplomacy in the Internet era. This reflects the international responsibility, which the country increasingly shoulders, and helps the government project a favorable image to both Chinese and foreign people.

Traditionally, international relations scholars tend to analyze online opinion and behavior according to unitary state and society frameworks. In general, they anticipate two potential global outcomes of the Internet: either universal norms are transmitted and shared by all citizens and societies connected to it, or a fragmented, divided Internet will end up controlled by governments, to exercise their sovereign power and impose their norms on citizens and society within their domain. However, research on the online community in China informs us of a trend toward humanity irrespective of political boundaries (Liljeblad 2013, 5).

Following the tsunami in the Indian Ocean in December 2004, Chinese leaders immediately sent their condolences to the victims and sympathy to the bereaved families and the injured. Governmental aid and a Chinese International Search and Rescue Team (CISAR) were sent to disaster areas (Zhao 2008, 49). Meanwhile, Chinese official media outlets released news reports on the disasters to ensure information transparency and guide domestic public opinion. Along with a positive interaction between information delivery by official media about the natural disaster in the Indian Ocean and public opinion, a written request for donations from a university in Shanghai included the statement of the ‘hurt of all human beings’ (Qi 2011, 883), while the large-scale international donations of the entire Chinese people also drew attention to the common knowledge of ‘human beings’. After the earthquake and tsunami happened to Japan in 2011, information released by official outlets provided real-time news about the disaster and victims in Japan, and nearly 80 % of Chinese netizens supported the government’s decision to aid Japan despite existing friction between the two countries (Liu 2011, 660). In the era of Internet communications, the smaller the world becomes and the closer that human beings can be to one another.

In this sense, the attention to foreign policy issues and also to foreign citizens has risen with the transmission of international crises-themed news, which requires instant official responses to international events. Therefore, the Internet and Internet communication, to a certain extent, influence the selection of foreign policy problems that governmental departments need to deal with.

## 4.2 Searching and Choosing the Alternatives in the Internet Era

Besides influencing the selection of decision problems, understanding the effect of online public opinion on Chinese FPDM also requires a look at how it affects the selection of alternatives to foreign policy problems. In fact, the starting point of discussing the way in which domestic contexts or public opinion affects the process of Chinese FPDM involves distinguishing three levels of opinion: elite, sub-elite, and popular. Only the last of these is regarded as public opinion in Western traditions (Fewsmith and Rosen 2011, 152). ‘Elite’ refers to political leaders; ‘sub-elite’ refer to a group of public intellectuals who participate in public discourse and seek to influence informed public opinion and government policy. Some scholars argue that political elites maintain the huge advantage of acting as the information source of foreign policy to mass media and citizens, making them leaders in manipulating public opinion and influencing FPDM (Zhu 2008, 43).

In general terms, the Internet reduces the cost of transmitting information, and enables people to bypass those traditional intermediaries who used to have the power to control information flows. Yet reaching an accurate understanding of foreign affairs and foreign policy invariably requires much more professional knowledge than that enjoyed by most of the public, who necessarily live in a small part of the planet, and lack intimate knowledge of what happens elsewhere (Lippmann 2004, 43). In other words, the broader public tends to discuss public policy with reference to their personal feelings, but lacks any sense of the background, cause and effect of international events, or specific knowledge about the countries involved.

Therefore, opinion leaders act as intermediaries, explaining and broadcasting information about international events through their own understanding. In this sense, the communication process of international events in China consists of two parts: from the Internet to opinion leaders, then from opinion leaders to the general public. Opinion leaders do not necessarily come either from the elite or the sub-elite: as Katz and Lazarsfeld argue, ‘they seemed to be distributed in all occupational groups, and on every social and economic level’ (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955, 32). However, those able to secure for themselves the position of leaders of public opinion may transmit personal views about foreign policy to broader publics without checking the information itself, and simply rely on instinct, intuition, and tact to determine what the public wants and how badly it wants it. In China, given that the number of networking websites, social media, and instant communication technologies is increasing at a geometric rate, the influence of opinion leaders on the formation and communication of public opinion about foreign policy has been greatly enhanced, which in turn requires official foreign policy departments to compete with those opinion leaders.

However, instant media coverage of foreign policy issues by either state-owned media or online private news outlets, and free expression of the edited ideas of opinion leaders mobilizes public opinion, which in turn limits the political space for decision-makers to back down during these events (Johnston 2006, 341). China’s island sovereignty disputes with neighboring countries are oft-cited cases, particularly the century-old dispute between China and Japan over the Diaoyu/

Senkaku Islands. In 2012, the Japanese government's attempt to 'nationalize' the islands and right-wing Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara's plan to buy the islands evoked protests in more than 200 Chinese cities (Weiss 2014, 189). The diplomatic statements and official protest issued by the Chinese government failed to satisfy the public, and strong adversarial sentiments in cyberspace and attacks on Japanese business establishments led the Chinese government to cancel upcoming events to commemorate 40 years of diplomatic relations with Japan (Associated Press 2012). It seemed that online public opinion provided domestic support for Chinese FPDM, but to a certain extent, also forced the Chinese government's hand (Gui 2013). Yet in the long run, the nationalistic rhetoric subsided and cooler heads gradually prevailed with the governmental guidance in effect.

The stated-owned media is a crucial part in China's information system, and still serves as a propaganda tool and mouthpiece for authorities and political leaders (Fewsmith and Rose 2001, 172–5), so online public opinion based on official information sources can be influenced by the Chinese government. For Chinese FPDM, online nationalism is a typical form, because the government has identified online nationalism as one form of online public opinion that could be channeled in the right direction and used positively (Zhao 2013, 551). In this sense, public opinion is more instrumental than original for Chinese FPDM (Sun 2011).

Nevertheless, the Chinese government, particularly the departments related to FPDM, maintains an interactive relationship with public opinion in the Internet era. The Chinese government can guide online public opinion regarding foreign policy issues by restricting foreign policy information circulation, but Chinese leaders also try to avoid being in stark opposition to the popular mood (Paltiel 2010). In fact, online nationalism serves as the means of legitimizing the CCP and of evaluating the performance of the state. The rise of online and offline nationalism occurs in parallel with China's increasing economic, political and military power, meaning that China can adopt tougher approaches in dealing with its external relations and pursuing its core interests (Zhao 2013, 511). Accordingly, the increasing influence of nationalism on Chinese foreign policy reflects a positive response to public opinion and also indicates that public opinion can affect Chinese foreign policy independently in certain situations, instead of always being manipulated by government.

In this sense, Chinese officials do, in any case, claim that the government takes public opinion into consideration during the FPDM process (Chinanews.com 2010b). The nationwide debate about foreign relations with Japan among Chinese scholars, journalists from state-owned media, and researchers from official institutions in 2003 could be viewed as the extension of the democratization of decision-making to the realm of foreign policy (Feng 2003, 37). In 2010, Google, an Internet giant, claimed that a sophisticated cyber-attack which it suffered on 12 January had originated in China, and then announced that, in response to the Chinese Internet censorship, it would stop censoring search results in China (Drummond 2010). In addition, at exactly the same time, Hilary Clinton gave a speech emphasizing the importance of American foreign policy in promoting the Internet freedom (Clinton 2010).

After Google's servers were moved from mainland China to Hong Kong and the American government made its comments on China's Internet freedom, Chinese

netizens started the criticizing Internet censorship and calling for more Internet freedom in the virtual community, which had a negative effect on the Chinese government's domestic legitimacy and international image. Thus, China's MFA had to announce that its Internet regulation was in line with the prevailing international practice, and China welcomed global Internet companies to run their businesses legally in China (Chinanews.com 2010a). Although the Google events should be solved in the area of commerce, public opinion and international press made it a political and diplomatic issue. Faced with criticism from home and abroad, the Chinese government took proactive steps to change its role in Internet governance by holding the Second World Internet Conference, emphasizing four core principles of Internet governance, including peace, security, openness, and cooperation (Lang 2015), and a new leading group of cyber security and informatization was also established (*ibid*). As a result, newly released survey data show a high level of public satisfaction toward Chinese diplomacy in the field of the Internet (Chinadaily.com 2016).

On December 23, 2003, Li Zhaoxing, then the Minister of Foreign Affairs, interacted with the Chinese public about foreign policy through the Internet, the first such example of this in China (Xinhuanet.com 2003). The Public Diplomacy Department was then established within the Foreign Ministry on March 19, 2004 with the purpose of collecting Chinese public opinion about foreign policy, and regulating daily communications between the public and the foreign affairs department (Li 2009, 61). All these phenomena were indicative of a positive response on the part of the Chinese government to online public opinion.

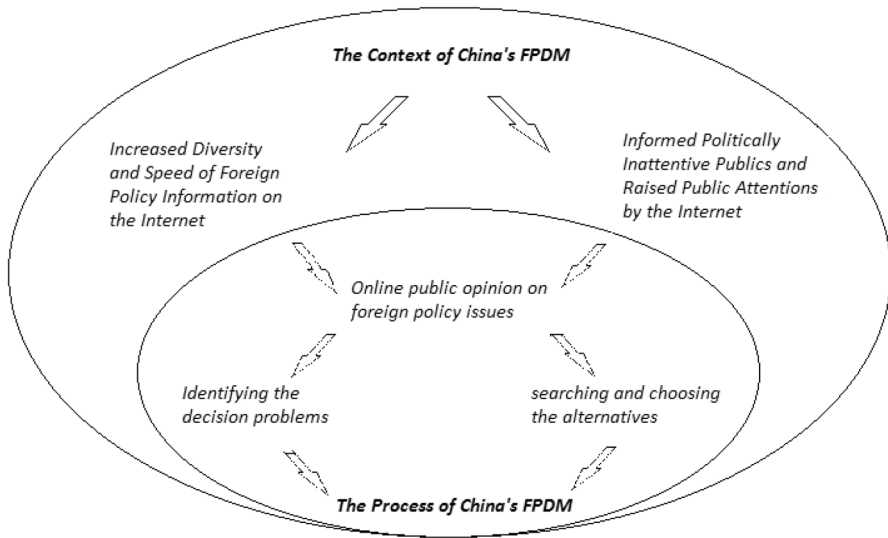
Thus, the Internet, by accelerating the speed of information dissemination and increasing the scale of public discussion on foreign policy issues, exerts pressure on the process of Chinese FPDM (Grant 2005, 5; Baum 2003, 8), which not only influences the selection of decision problems but also limits the space for decision-makers in searching and choosing alternatives to foreign policy problems.

## 5 Conclusion

As this study has demonstrated, the rapid development of the Internet in China has benefited hugely from governmental support. The administration in Beijing recognizes the importance of ICTs in promoting economic development and reducing the gap between China and developed countries and, therefore, supports the establishment of information infrastructure of such a quality and depth that it amounts to a particularly rare example among developing countries. Nowadays, because of the diversity and increased speed of information circulation, the freedom of information transmission and online opinion expression, the huge proportion of Chinese netizens, and the rapidly increasing access to Internet-enabled mobile devices, the country's political and social system has been affected in almost every aspect.

This study defines the Internet as an instrument of mass media in a networked world and has identified the Internet's influence on Chinese FPDM in two aspects that can be summarized in the following Fig. 1.





**Fig. 1** The context and process of China's FPDM in the internet era

On the one hand, the utilization of the Internet communication changes the context of Chinese FPDM by increasing the diversity and velocity of foreign policy information and raising public awareness of foreign policy issues, which makes public discussion and public opinion possible and constitutes the atmosphere for China's FPDM in a networked world (as shown in the outer circle, Fig. 1). On the other hand, public opinion exerts pressure on the process of Chinese FPDM through influencing the selection of decision problems and limiting the space for decision-makers, which reflects the specific dynamic of Chinese FPDM (as showed in the inner circle, Fig. 1). Figure 1 not only tells us how the Internet influences Chinese FPDM at macro- and micro-level at the same time, but also helps us understand how these two levels interact and impact the decision-making process. Thus, it also has a positive side for Chinese policymakers: to win the competition with various information sources and maintain its dominant position in decision-making, the government has to build its credibility on the provision of accurate, reliable foreign policy information to the public. During this process, public opinion, formed on the basis of instant, credible information, plays a clear supervisory role in the process and outcome of Chinese FPDM.

This study systematically analyzed the influence of the Internet on the context and process of Chinese FPDM. Through studying the relationship between the Internet and Chinese FPDM in theory, Internet communication amounts to a wholly new phenomenon and plays an important role in the foreign policy realm. Since 2012, Xi Jinping has taken charge of all foreign policy related decision-making units (Jakobson and Manuel 2016, 98), and became the leader of newly established CNSC as mentioned above, which not only increases policy coordination but also adds new factors to Chinese FPDM. A detailed discussion regarding the influence of

the new leadership on Chinese FPDM in the Internet era is beyond the scope of this study, but it merits further study. It is hoped that the findings of this study will help to enlighten the role of ICTs and the Internet on Chinese politics and, indeed, its foreign policy decision-making.

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